



## King's Research Portal

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication record in King's Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Bubb, A. (Accepted/In press). An Element of Risk: the Corrupt Contractor in Indian Fiction and Film, 1886-1983. *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*.

### **Citing this paper**

Please note that where the full-text provided on King's Research Portal is the Author Accepted Manuscript or Post-Print version this may differ from the final Published version. If citing, it is advised that you check and use the publisher's definitive version for pagination, volume/issue, and date of publication details. And where the final published version is provided on the Research Portal, if citing you are again advised to check the publisher's website for any subsequent corrections.

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognize and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the Research Portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact [librarypure@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:librarypure@kcl.ac.uk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

An Element of Risk: the Corrupt Contractor in Indian Fiction and Film, 1886-1983

Bharat should have known something was up. He tried to do a good job on the building site, be an honest supervisor to the labourers. But one day a man in a suit and sunglasses drove up and told everyone they were laid off; and now he finds himself in a bar, in front of another man in a suit—a *khadi* suit. Nekiram: “Mr Nice”—an all-round mastermind, this one. Hardly to be trusted. And not just because of the *khadi*, which he somehow wears so showily; or because he habitually refers to himself in the third person; or even because this is the appointed moment in a Manoj Kumar film (*Roti Kapda aur Makan*, 1974, to be precise) when the villain makes his entrance. No, our nationally-named hero should have suspected his soon-to-be boss, because he used the same technique as any unscrupulous employer would when seeking to evade legal and financial responsibility. Instead of a first paycheck, he gave his reluctant new henchman a piece of paper to sign:

*Shri Nekiram naukri nahin deta, hissa deta. Char aane. Kyonki mere kaam men thoda jokhim hai, thoda khatara hai.*

Shri Nekiram doesn't give jobs, he gives a share. 25%. Because in my line of work there is a little danger—an element of risk.

The subject of this essay is the cultural history of the scheming contractor. In Hindi cinema from the 1960s to the early 1990s, he became a commonplace figure: a prefabricated target for general resentment, and a locus for anxieties surrounding supposed ‘anti-national’ cliques. But the contractor is more than a generic representative of corruption. He is responsible for specific and systemic abuses, and thus must be set apart from other varieties of public menace like the racketeer, smuggler, double-dealing politician or “foreign” conspirator.<sup>1</sup> His particularity as a villain is strongly suggested by his longevity in that role, with his origins traceable to sources long predating the cinema. The dodgy builder, exemplified perhaps in the manic Tarneja and lethargic Ahuja in *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983), owes his form to decades of fictional treatment, in such nationalist and post-independence authors such as Premchand and R.K. Narayan. Furthermore, his real genesis is to be found in colonial Indian writing, which took its cue from British Victorian novels, but developed the trope in a manner that presaged the special valency and range of associations that adheres to the contractor in the modern subcontinent. Notwithstanding evident differences in the political context of the 1980s and that of the 1880s, continuity in public concerns surrounding civil works and procurement has given rise to a cultural archetype for which we can chart a consistent, developing genealogy.

My primary aim is to offer an integrated series of examples that conclusively demonstrate that genealogy, observing how successive generations of fictive contractors have shifted their shape in response to evolving social conditions and the narrative requirements placed upon him. But I will also use this chronology as a means to approach the unique and enigmatic Indianness of this figure, and to get at the essential characteristics—or contextual circumstances—that have led him to haunt the cultural imagination for so long. For it is certain that “contractor” conjures a kind of status in India,

---

<sup>1</sup> These villainous types are cited by Fareeduddin Kazmi, who omits contractors altogether from his list, in “How angry is the Angry Young Man?: ‘Rebellion’ in Conventional Hindi Films,” in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability and Indian Popular Cinema*, ed. Ashis Nandy (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 141.

weighted with financial and even political power, that the word does not possess in the west. The explanation lies at least partly in an economy for so long overseen and artificially constricted by the state, where supplying things to the government on contract—public works, equipment, raw materials, or labour—has been a safe choice among limited paths to wealth. In this field, intimacy with officials has been both the prerequisite of success and its outcome, and the self-reinforcing cycle of wealth of influence has held as true in independent India—where the contractor is a crony—as it did under colonial rule—when he was a collaborator. Naturally, the temptation to milk the system is also great. It has been estimated that corruption boosts the cost of public procurement in India by up to 25%, and hence the contractor, or *thekedar* (ठेकेदार) in Hindi, is also a proverbial swindler.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, *theke* and *thekedar* feature colourfully in contemporary idiom. Vigilantes and godmen, for example, who appoint themselves moral police are often spoken of as *dharm ke thekedar* or *naitika ke thekedar*, the contractors of religion or ethics. Plainly, such people consider themselves appointed to a divine task: they are God's henchmen. But the jibe derives its sting from the implication carried by the word *thekedar*, of hypocrisy and self-interest flaunting itself beneath the sober mask of public service. This points both to the doubtful esteem in which many Indians understandably hold their public servants, as well as the fundamentally ambiguous and perennially shifting attitude which postcolonial nationalism has held towards capitalists. However, we must remember that in India there is also a certain humdrum fixity about *thekedars*—witness entries for the surname “Contractor” in any Bombay telephone directory—which indicates that they do not constitute, as movie-makers might have us believe, a gang of shadowy conspirators, but hold an integral and customary place in the Indian economy. Indeed, their ubiquity in the world of work surely underlies, and developed alongside, their place in fictional convention. And the instrument of their economic dominance is exactly what ‘Shri’ Nekiram so insouciantly offers to Bharat: a cut. The essence of subcontracting is the deferral of risk: one foregoes guaranteed payment and, by agreeing to complete a task to schedule, hazards personal loss in hope of greater eventual profit. The temptation for an employer who is undercapitalized, or has inadequate access to credit, to force this system on his subordinates is considerable; and in India, a poorly-regulated jurisdiction where the power of trade unions has declined markedly since the 1970s, this has and routinely continues to occur. Like the proverbial contractors of religion, the transaction has also left its mark on contemporary idiom. “*Main ne kya tumhara theka liya hai?*”, is a familiar rhetorical question one can well imagine a boss putting to his cringing employee: “what, have I signed a contract for you?”—i.e. is your life *my* responsibility?

This economy of risk, I would argue, gets to the heart of the matter. While the filmic contractor is construed as endangering the country and its development for the sake of selfish gain, it to his analogous placing of the worker's household in a position of unwanted, opportunistic jeopardy that working-class cinema-goers would be likely to respond. As we trace this particular formation of capitalism and its accompanying cultural connotations back to patterns of exploitation established long before independence, it is important to register it as provoking anxiety and resentment at all different levels of the economic hierarchy—governmental, clerical, and proletarian.

#### ‘A Bloated Mechanic’: the Contractor and the Official Mind in Colonial India

The concept of a signed agreement between two parties for goods or services was certainly not introduced to India by the British—though they did create a regulatory framework for the enforcement of such documents.<sup>3</sup> More plainly a European invention, and more pertinent to our

<sup>2</sup> S.Z.S. Tabish and Kumar Neeraj Jha, “Analyses and Evaluation of Irregularities in Public Procurement in India,” *Construction Management and Economics* 29.3 (2011): 262.

<sup>3</sup> Tirthankar Roy, *An Economic History of Early Modern India* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 48.

enquiry, was the system of soliciting competitive tenders from private capitalists for the execution of government commissions. The *OED*'s two earliest citations for the use of "contractor" in this sense date from the eighteenth century, one in relation to harbour-dredging and the other to military procurement. Judging from the literary record, I would suggest that the notion of a contractor as an opportunist—indeed, an upstart—who has legally monopolized for himself a fast track to wealth became widespread after the Napoleonic Wars, during which the British government incurred mammoth debts paying for fortifications, ships and the supply of its continental armies. When the fraudulent company in Thackeray's *Great Hoggarty Diamond* (1841) goes belly-up, its directors abscond with the sole exception of one, 'a wealthy navy contractor' at Chatham.<sup>4</sup> As his name suggests, however, Mr Manstraw is in reality not rich at all, but only a convenient fall-guy and bait for the company's creditors. Evidently anyone equipping the navy was assumed to be raking it in.

The Railway Mania of the 1840s heralded the mid-century economy of frenzied building and engineering projects that would spread the tender system around the British Empire and beyond, making—and breaking—the fortunes of so-called contractor-kings like Thomas Brassey and Samuel Morton Peto. Trollope's *Doctor Thorne* (1858), the third of the Barsetshire novels, caricatures one such: a ne'er-do-well stonemason who goes to prison but is discovered later a millionaire. After completing a railway of vital national importance in record time, Roger Scratcherd is even made a baronet, though he never loses his coarse manners, country accent, and violent drunkenness.<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that in spite of his many other faults, Scratcherd is not conspicuously dishonest: his purpose is merely to embody a ruthless new brand of enterprise, before which accustomed rank is only too willing to prostrate itself. Entirely fraudulent, by contrast, is the Melmotte in Trollope's subsequent *The Way We Live Now*, published in 1875 in the heyday of the heroic contractor. But then Melmotte (even if, as is rumoured, he originally made his fortune by 'provision[ing] the Southern army in the American civil war'<sup>6</sup>) is not a contractor. He is an émigré financier, floating atop a credit bubble premised on a chimerical railway scheme, which he sustains through the excitement generated by his own showy personal expenditure. The promoter, the speculator, the forger—these draw Trollope's fire, while the contractor remains at most an accessory to their misdeeds.

Indian writing is a different matter. In 1886, Rudyard Kipling was a Lahore journalist who had just published *Departmental Ditties*, a series of juvenile pot-shots at the nepotistic, and narcissistic, practices of Simla. The first poem in the collection, 'General Summary', rehearses a favourite theme: when it comes to the workings of an empire, things like preferment, procurement and the commissariat have not altered in millennia.

Who shall doubt "the secret hid  
Under Cheops' pyramid"  
Was that the contractor did  
Cheops out of several millions?  
Or that Joseph's sudden rise  
To Comptroller of Supplies  
Was a fraud of monstrous size  
On King Pharaoh's swart Civilians?<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> W.M. Thackeray, *The History of Samuel Titmarsh and the Great Hoggarty Diamond* (London: Smith, Elder & Co, 1849), 166.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Trollope, *Doctor Thorne* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1859), 105.

<sup>6</sup> Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*, ed. John Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *The Cambridge Edition of the Poems of Rudyard Kipling*, ed. Thomas Pinney (3 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 8.

The knavery of contractors is shown by Kipling to operate at all different levels of the system. They put lives, property, and government prestige at risk with their scamping, as in the poem ‘Giffen’s Debt’. Their public-spiritedness leads them to worm their way onto local councils, as alleged in one of his newspaper columns, where they offer to shoulder such lucrative burdens as municipal printing. The profession is also the refuge of scoundrels. Before embarking on their latest venture in ‘The Man Who Would Be King’, Dravot and Carnehan have been among other things boiler-fitters, platelayers and ‘petty contractors’—which helps explain the strict ‘contract’ they draw up between themselves before setting off for the Hindu Kush.<sup>8</sup>

Kipling’s contempt (and we should remember here that his father’s rank in India was only that of museum curator) speaks eloquently of his aspiration to be counted among the official classes. Like all tradesmen and commercial agents lacking a formal position in the colony, contractors were apt to be dismissed in civil and military circles as mere “boxwallahs”. What may have piqued this snobbery especially in their case was that the railways, canals and other undertakings through which the state legitimized its rule were dependent on their contribution—which was motivated not, of course, by ideals of dutiful service, but by base and cunning profit. The contractor’s opportunism betrays the disinterested “civilizing mission”. His individualism, in the face of a corporate and highly-stratified colonial society, is potentially subversive. Resentment of contractors by the Public Works Department cadre charged with examining, and approving, their projects also partook of a certain professional hauteur. However experienced in their line of work, contractors often lacked formal qualification and were in some cases even autodidacts. This was certainly the case with Joseph Stephens, an Anglo-Danish contractor of the 1860s whose archived papers at Linnaeus University throw valuable light on early railway development. Originally invited to India by his engineer brother-in-law, he learnt his trade *in situ* and left India a rich man—much to the chagrin of the brother-in-law, who returned to Europe only on his deathbed.<sup>9</sup> First stoked in the mid-century, such smouldering resentments were clearly familiar matter to the later readers of Kipling and of his contemporaries. In Flora Annie Steel’s 1894 novel *The Potter’s Thumb*, a PWD engineer sneeringly refers to a well-known contractor as ‘a bloated mechanic’, who began his career hammering rivets but ended up a fat cat.<sup>10</sup> These, then, are Kipling’s ‘swart civilians’: educated gentlemen of middle-class origin whose meagre salaries are dwarfed by the profits of a jumped-up Cockney. Their tanned faces bespeak honest toil, while their soft and ‘bloated’ antagonist succeeds by clever jobbing and slick talk. ‘Swart’ could also signify, moreover, a brand of shame: for in the course of weary careers they will burn black under the Indian sun, their Englishness steadily diminishing long after the contractor has absconded with his fast buck.

Such writing testifies to an established stereotype, which manifests repeatedly in fiction and poetry of the 1880s and 1890s, after taking initial form in the bureaucratic literature of prior decades. One clear defect in the contractor, according to these official sources, is his lack of any sense of trusteeship. Giving the lie to the Raj’s ostensible programme of safeguarding and developing the country, he is unabashed in his appropriation and despoilment of it. In the early years of railways in Bengal, G.H. Lushington was sent upcountry to make over some land, with the state’s blessing, to representatives of the East Indian Railway Company. He noted with disgust that contractors engaged by the company, impatient of his arrival, had already begun throwing up earthworks and cutting down trees on land that was not yet legally theirs.<sup>11</sup> More distressing reports were filed by Sir Alexander Cunningham, who as the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India made long

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Pinney (ed.), *Kipling’s India: Uncollected Sketches, 1884-88* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 67; Rudyard Kipling, *Stories and Poems*, ed. Daniel Karlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 64.

<sup>9</sup> Linnaeus University Library, Huseby Archive, Box EI:2 [Joseph Stephens to George Stephens, 12 Jan 1868].

<sup>10</sup> Flora Annie Steel, *The Potter’s Thumb* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894), 313.

<sup>11</sup> S. Settar (ed.), *Railway Construction in India: Select Documents* (4 vols., New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1999-2009), I, 471.

winter tours of isolated monuments. In the early 1870s he visited Tigwan in modern Madhya Pradesh, expecting to find three dozen small Gupta temples.

The whole of these had been utterly destroyed by a railway contractor, who collected all the squared stones in a heap together, ready to be carted off to the neighbouring railway. Two hundred carts are said to have been brought to the foot of the hill by this rapacious spoiler, when the removal of the stones was peremptorily stopped by an order from the Deputy Commissioner of Jabalpur, to whom the people had sent a petition... Wherever I go, I hear of the sordid rapacity of some of these railway contractors.<sup>12</sup>

Cunningham had elsewhere seen an ancient statue toppled into a contractor's ditch, and such incidents become a running theme in his reports.<sup>13</sup> Joseph Stephens had been up to similar tricks himself only a few years earlier, seeking permission in 1866 to quarry ballast from the old city walls of Akola. The Dane appears to have been thoroughly uninterested in the long-term impact of his ventures in India, and men like Cunningham would have been unsurprised to read his candid admission that 'the whole and sole interest is to get done with it as soon as one can and pocket the proceeds.'<sup>14</sup>

Cultural insensitivity could be dangerous as well as vulgar. According to the *Engineer* periodical, the contract system was originally used in India at 'a comparatively early date' for maintaining roads on the island of Salsette, but it was the railway era that first brought to the country a significant population of European platelayers, engine-drivers and other skilled workers.<sup>15</sup> Among other arguments put forward in the vigorous debate at this time over the practicability of the system in India, the 1857 Rebellion brought into sharp focus the fear that native sentiments could be offended by the loutish and violent behaviour of rude mechanicals. In 1859 the *Calcutta Review* took note of 'a daily increasing class of Europeans, those employed on the Indian railways, many of them rough, uneducated men', and three years later Sir George Trevelyan, in his classic account of post-mutiny India, deplored the situation whereby a 'native of rank' might be saluted by the Collector one day, and the next 'flouted and kicked about by any planter's assistant or sub-deputy railway-contractor'.<sup>16</sup> Cases of personal violence were indeed a common source of popular complaint, though the reports on the vernacular press compiled by Presidency governments do not show any particular animus towards railwaymen. On 22 July 1877, for instance, *Native Opinion* is said to have lamented the inexplicable action of one Captain Street in burning the huts of labourers employed by a rail contractor on the Bhor Ghat. The latter, it added, was expected to prosecute the arsonist for damages.<sup>17</sup> A passenger passing along this same line ten years earlier, who allegedly flourished his sword at station staff when requested to pay a surcharge, was found likewise to be a headstrong young army officer. Nonetheless the smirch on contractors remained. In the same year that Assistant Surgeon Vallance rattled his sabre, an enquiry was made into an embezzlement carried out by a European time-keeper on the Bombay, Baroda & Central India Railway, with the Resident Engineer characteristically excusing his failure to check this fraud by pleading that so many of his hours had been spent keeping watch over

---

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *Report of a Tour in the Central Provinces in 1873-74 and 1874-75* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1966), 41.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Cunningham, *Report for the Year 1871-72* (Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1966), 66.

<sup>14</sup> Huseby Archive, Box Fla:2 [Joseph Stephens to Deputy Commissioner of Akola, 12 Sept 1866] and EI:2 [Joseph Stephens to George Stephens, 17 Dec 1868].

<sup>15</sup> "The Contract System in India," *Engineer* 27.685 (1869): 121.

<sup>16</sup> "English Life in Bengal," *Calcutta Review* 33.56 (December 1859): 325; George Otto Trevelyan, *The Competition Wallah* (London: Macmillan, 1864), 447.

<sup>17</sup> British Library, IOR/L/R/5/132 [Report on Native Papers, 28 July 1877].

two untrustworthy contractors.<sup>18</sup> Evidently, it was commonly held that such men would waste no chance to embarrass the ruling race, whether by mere brutishness or by their venality.

If these much-feared evils project themselves throughout official discourse, in fictional representations they serve to throw into relief certain official virtues—duty, selflessness and brotherly loyalty to one’s colleagues and superiors. This ethos is given one of its most sustained expressions in *The Potter’s Thumb*. Steel’s three-volume novel turns on access to water, and the attempt by a princely state to corrupt two PWD officers in charge of a sluice-gate on an isolated stretch of canal. The title refers to fatal character flaws—or, in literal terms, a weakness in a vessel owing to a momentary slip by its creator—and the kind of stress which can force a crack in a man’s idealism. The honour of the two white men is never seriously in question, though we do hear of some Indian subordinates and how ‘the potter’s thumb had slipped over their honesty’.<sup>19</sup> The pair are undone instead through their mutual love for the charming but peculative widow Mrs Boynton, whom the princely state’s intriguers blackmail into stealing the sluice key. George Keene shoots himself rather than face official disgrace, and Dan Fitzgerald later mercifully dies before he can marry Mrs Boynton and have his romantic, heroic vision of life shattered by her confession of guilt.

The second theme to which the potter metaphor lends itself is craftsmanship, and doing a job right. Like Kipling—who indeed used the very same analogy in one of his poems<sup>20</sup>—Steel was fascinated by the conspicuous drudgery of Indian administration, and understood that bureaucracy’s most serious defect, as well as greatest strength, lay in its stifling of individual creativity. The counterpoint to this is the energetic contractor, who is both sneered at and grudgingly admired. Early in the novel, one of Dan’s jealous colleagues admits that the PWD only employs ‘hacks’ who know how to obey orders, adding ‘man alive! if I had your power I would chuck to-morrow, and die contractor, engineer, K.C.I.E., and the richest man in India!’.<sup>21</sup> Dan’s dull-witted superiors do not approve his innovations, one of which he jokingly refers to, contractor-fashion, as a ‘dodge’. An Irishman, his quick wits and lateral thinking are associated with his imaginative Celtic nature: he is of the breed who win empires; stolid, earnest ‘St George’ Keene of the breed who keep them. Unsurprisingly it falls to a Scotsman, the novel’s third young engineer, to provide commentary and report with mixed feelings Dan’s eventual recruitment by the ‘bloated mechanic’ Mr Brown.

[He] was out here contracting one of the big railway bridges... began life as a riveter sort of fellow, but with a knack of making money and a keen eye beyond belief. I remembered his telling me that Dan was too good for us, and that if ever he came across a job in which he wanted help, he would try and steal him. This is some huge irrigation scheme—private—down South. If Dan succeeds, and he will if anyone can, there will be millions in it.<sup>22</sup>

At bottom, it is not merely that riveters who become millionaires are socially resented, but that capitalism itself evinces contradictory responses in the servants and advocates of empire. Why else would Kipling squander, at times, his usually terse prose in veneration of the jargon and brash technical banter of businessmen, and yet shrink from the ‘taipans’ during an early visit to Hong Kong, and mutter his suspicions about British profiteers selling artillery to a hostile China?<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Maharashtra State Archives, PWD (Railways), 1867, Volume 11, Compilation 319; 1867, Volume 17, Compilation 131.

<sup>19</sup> Steel, *Potter’s Thumb*, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Kipling, *Cambridge Edition of the Poems*, 1891.

<sup>21</sup> Steel, *Potter’s Thumb*, 90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 313.

<sup>23</sup> Kipling, Rudyard. *From Sea to Sea and other sketches: letters of travel* (2 vols., London: Macmillan, 1900), I, 294. I have examined this vacillation of Kipling’s at greater length in “The Meaning of Things: Kipling’s

The concept of unblemished spotlessness which is uppermost in *The Potter's Thumb*, as one might expect, tied up with race and racial mixing, and this confluence becomes particularly marked upon mention of the suggestively-named Brown. Still playing on Steel's mind just four pages later, the figure transmutes into a 'rich Hindu contractor' whose boorish behaviour sees him chucked out of the home of the aristocratic courtesan Chandni. This chapter takes place in Simla, where the 'fat pig' has come presumably to hobnob with the officials who assess his tenders, and he serves to remind Chandni—and the reader—that for all its chicanery princely India remains preferable to the 'pushing' modern world outside.<sup>24</sup>

Today, Chandni's wealthy patron also reminds us that contractors made up a diverse professional class. The *Times of India* directory for 1868 indicates that most early contractors were English, but among the eighty-five names we also find Alves, Bartola, Costa, Lobo, Pinto and Xavier, along with the Jewish-sounding Isaac Sargon.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the directory only lists Europeans and Eurasians. Parsi contractors existed in Bombay before the coming of the railways, building municipal water-works and even battleships for the Royal Navy, and in time the profession would be steadily Indianized.<sup>26</sup> This development too was undoubtedly a source of suspicion—the mortar and plaster for viaducts was often mixed by Indian subcontractors, and it is telling that when those viaducts gave way so much blame should attach to these brown men and their alleged adulteration of this white stuff.<sup>27</sup> Kipling's verses about defrauding Pharaoh's 'swart civilians' take on a wholly new dimension, if we consider that his dodgy contractor may in fact be an Indian. The same dynamic can be perceived more markedly in another departmental ditty, 'Giffen's Debt'.

You know they dammed the Gauri with a dam,  
And all the good contractors scamped their work  
And all the bad material at hand  
Was used to dam the Gauri—which was cheap,  
And, therefore, proper.<sup>28</sup>

The Giffen of the title is a European drunkard who has run to ground in a riverside hamlet, but who recognizes the sound of a failing dyke and perishes in the act of warning the villagers. Although it is not made clear, one would suspect very much that Kipling is picturing his contractors as Punjabis. Even putting aside their numerousness, and the high-labour, low-skill nature of an earthwork, the poem's abiding theme is the vindication of one man's whiteness.

#### From Comprador to Crony Capitalist: the Contractor in Interwar and Postcolonial Fiction

The contractor who makes his appearance in nationalist fiction of the 1920s, and who is dyed deeper in his villainy by post-independence writing, will be like Chandni's patron almost always an Indian. But most of his defining attributes—cynicism, underhandedness, carpet-bagging, lack of patriotism—survive from the colonial era. He is still often an upstart who offends established rank, though the latter now comprises the clerical middle-classes rather than British sahibs, and in some cases he even remains an ethnic outsider or interloper. Premchand, the preeminent Hindi-Urdu novelist in the

---

Formative Journey 'Home' in 1889 and the Late Victorian Imperial Tour", *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 44/3 (2016).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>25</sup> *Times of India Calendar and Directory, 1868* (Bombay: Times of India, 1868).

<sup>26</sup> Dosabhai Framji Karaka, *History of the Parsis* (2 vols., London: Macmillan, 1884), II, 253-55.

<sup>27</sup> This was a common occurrence in Bombay Presidency following the severe monsoon of 1867. See, for example, *The Engineer's Journal* (Calcutta), 15 Mar 1869, 54.

<sup>28</sup> Kipling, *Cambridge Edition of the Poems*, 161.



decades before independence, was a satirist frequently prone to didacticism. But he is at his most wickedly funny when scarifying the world of businessmen and landholding notables then in the act of transferring their loyalties, one leg at a time, from the British to the Congress. The government contractor figures largely in this milieu, often in the form of a favoured manufacturer or, more interestingly, a landlord who by marshalling his tenantry has diversified into contracting. Such presumably is the 'Raja Sahib' who, wishing to pose as an intellectual, invites the penniless scrivener Pravin to his party in the story 'The Writer'. It's really something, Pravin remarks to his sceptical wife, that their moneyed neighbour has seen fit to honour him in this manner: मैं कोई ओहदेदार नहीं, जमींदार नहीं, ठेकेदार नहीं, केवल एक साधारण लेखक हूँ ('I'm no official, not some landowner or contractor, but only a simple writer'). The Raja's own vast fortune, meanwhile, is said to consist in estates, shops, trust funds, and ठीका (contracts), as though a contract were an asset rather than an agreement.<sup>29</sup>

Premchand, who resigned his own modest government post during the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920-22, identifies contractors less as capitalists or swindlers than as collaborators. Prominent in loyalist philanthropic associations, saluters of the war effort and singers of 'God Save the King', they will defile themselves with whatever quantity of meat or wine is needful to secure the grudging friendship of one red-nosed sahib. More than one story centres on a crisis wherein such a man sees the error of his ways and makes a sincere conversion to Gandhianism. For Khubchand, the Bombay mill-owner in 'Damul ka Kaidi' ('Wheel of Fortune'), this moment arrives when he and his police protectors open fire on striking workers. This 1932 story is among Premchand's most preachy and transparent parables, recalling the British works (such as Galsworthy's *Strife*) that he translated into Hindi—though from this background it also derives its witty Dickensian opening, which sees Khubchand wrapping up presents on Christmas Eve for his European cronies. A much superior story on the same pattern is 'Vichitra Holi' ('An Odd Holi'), published in 1921 at the height of the Non-Cooperation Movement, in which Lala Ujagarmal is portrayed as the leader of his town's sycophants and lickspittles.

अंग्रेजों में इधर उनका आदर-सम्मान विशेष रूप से होने लगा था। कई बड़े-बड़े ठेके, जो पहले अंग्रेजी ठेकेदारों ही को मिला करते थे उन्हें दिये गये थे।

Lately his stock with the British had risen especially high. Several very big contracts, which before would only have been entrusted to European contractors, were now given to him.

As in 'Wheel of Fortune', the story begins with the self-interested observance of a religious festival. When Lala chooses the morning of Holi to call on the ireful and unchristian Mr Cross, the latter's servants trick him into believing that their master is going to participate in the fun this year. Though Cross sees red when Lala cheerfully spurts coloured water in his face, it is the contractor's vision that is wiped clean as he flees his friend's slashing horsewhip.

The roguish contractor of Kipling and Steel loses in these stories his villainous intent, and becomes rather a dupe or stooge of his British sponsors. But interestingly, *thekedari* had not always been for Premchand a byword for hypocrisy—and in this he curiously echoes his Anglo-Indian precursors. Munshi Sanjivan Lal is a secondary character in the novel *Vardaan*, first published as *Jalva-i-Isar* in 1912. He was once in government employment, but like Dan Fitzgerald his independent way of thinking (स्वतन्त्र इच्छा) lost him the goodwill of his superiors and, after being forced to resign, he transferred his talents to the lucrative field of contracting.<sup>30</sup> A thoughtful and kindly man, Sanjivan

<sup>29</sup> Munshi Premchand, *Shatranj ke Khiladi tatha Anya Kahaniyaan* [The Chess-Players and Other Stories] (Delhi: Sakshi Prakashan, 2011), 196-99. When an English edition has been unavailable, I have quoted Premchand in the original and given my own translation.

<sup>30</sup> Munshi Premchand, *Vardaan* [The Boon] (Delhi: J.C. Publications, 1993), 25.

Lal highlights an undercurrent in Premchand that persists and resurfaces even in his 1936 masterpiece *Godaan*, in which the word *thekedar* applies to the road-builder in whose service Hori's weary body is finally broken, but also to the maverick nationalist Mirza Khurshed, who is seen at the labour exchange hiring poor men to spend the day playing *kabaddi* (a schoolyard game). The mirza is also an outsider in the Lucknow of the novel (he was expelled from Iraq after having an affair with an Englishwoman), yet his anomalous status is a mark not of shiftiness but of enterprise.<sup>31</sup> He shares common cause with Sanjivan Lal: the first man turns contractor because officialdom sets a ceiling to his professional growth; the second's success as a contractor leads him to test the colour bar in a rather more hands-on manner.

This hesitant romanticisation of the risk-taker (and the Mirza's flair, in this regard, is in pronounced contrast to the *settled* interests of a character like the feudal Rai Saheb) may even betoken the social utility that may the social utility lying dormant in this man-manager who remains ultimately a playboy. The suggestion is particularly remarkable in a writer like Premchand, whose investments both in Gandhian ethics and in leftist formations like the Progressive Writers Movement might lead one to anticipate a decided aversion to capitalists. But then Gandhi's longstanding alliance with the pious manufacturer G.D. Birla, as well as later developments like the emergence of the pro-business Swatantra Party in 1959 (in response to Nehru's statist outlook), are all indicative of a relationship of needy distrust between the political elite and the industrial elite. It is all the more noteworthy, therefore, that not even the most sneaking regard for the self-made man is detectable in R.K. Narayan, who published his first novel in 1935 a year before Premchand's death. The contractor generally makes his brief entries in the humdrum melody of Malgudi (the fictional town where nearly all of Narayan's stories are set) accompanied by a furtive, background leitmotif of intrigue and nepotism. One gets through hardly a single novel without some passing, usually derogatory reference to contractors. In *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), Jagan's stern father goes to pray in the temple with the 'aspect of someone going out to negotiate a contract', and grows rich through a mysterious process of litigation. The hapless Sriram, hero of *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), tries to bully a logging contractor into not selling timber to the British. Among his other good deeds Ramu prevails upon a greedy house-builder to lower his rates in 'A Career', while in 'Lawley Road' (1956) the municipality calls for tenders to demolish a British-era statue, but has to renege on this patriotic resolution when it finds it cannot afford the inflated estimates.<sup>32</sup>

Though they rarely appear as characters in their own right, contractors achieve an ubiquity in Narayan which is reflective of their proliferation throughout the world of work and business. It is an ubiquity in the world of small-town India Narayan portrays, and an inevitability in the working of his plots. This trend persists across the breadth of his oeuvre, both pre- and post- independence, though it intensifies after the 1940s, owing in no small part to his own exasperating travails with a dodgy builder.<sup>33</sup> Of more far-reaching influence, however, were the conditions he witnessed during the war years, when fortunes were made both by supplying the military, and by hoarding basic goods and catering to the thriving black market. Margayya, the titular *Financial Expert* (1945), knows that the closets and pillowcases of Malgudi's profiteers are stuffed with untaxed currency, which he hopes his owners can be persuaded to entrust to his fiscal wizardry. In this venture he is aided Dr Pal, the *soi-disant* scholar and sexologist who holds the secrets of every rascal in town.

---

<sup>31</sup> Munshi Premchand, *Godaan: The Gift of a Cow*, trans. Gordon C. Roadarmel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 82.

<sup>32</sup> R.K. Narayan, *The Vendor of Sweets* (New York: Viking, 1967), 165; *Waiting for the Mahatma* (Delhi: Penguin, 2010), 84; *Under the Banyan Tree and other stories* (London: Heinemann, 1985), 45; *Malgudi Days* (London: Penguin 1982), 114.

<sup>33</sup> R.K. Narayan, *My Days: a Memoir* (London: Penguin, 1989), 161.

Dr Pal knew the man who supplied office glue to the army and hoarded enough cash by showing a joint stock firm with imaginary partners; another merchant who supplied screws in cartons only half-filled; the contractor who built huts and got enormous bills passed easily by bribing the Garrison Engineer. He was a rich man because his huts, meant to stand for three years, would stand only for a couple of months...<sup>34</sup>

Driven by the conviction that only wealth can insulate his low-caste family from the slights and treachery of its betters, Margayya is blinded to the untrustworthiness of Pal and this proves his downfall. But as Fakrul Alam has pointed out, it is the seedy contemporary milieu to which his go-between introduces Margayya that gives the novel its bite, and makes it more than the comic and moralistic miser's progress many have taken it for.<sup>35</sup>

Narayan has often been subject to rather futile attacks, for his failure to write sufficiently political fiction in a country rank with injustice.<sup>36</sup> Yet those who see only quietism in his wry and resigned outlook fail to give Narayan credit for the incisive and sometimes absurd strain in his humour, seen most often in the essays collected as *A Writer's Nightmare*. The narrator of 'A Library Without Books', for example, comes across a public reading-room under construction, only to discover that its benefactors have undertaken the project merely to curry the favour of a certain politician. Worse, they have budgeted only for the building and not for its contents. "We will probably call for tenders for the supply of books", they remark. As for the selection of titles, "we shall leave it to the booksellers. We shall first measure the total shelf space, get an approximate idea of the number of volumes required to fill them, and call for quotations for the supply of this quantity".<sup>37</sup> The result, of course, will be that the local booksellers flood the library with their unsold stock—though Narayan leaves this to his reader's imagination. He illustrates the philanthropists' cosmetic logic eloquently enough by describing the neat signboard outside, acknowledging the good offices of architect, engineer, sanitary engineer and of course contractor in letters of gold.

Anyone who has taken a stroll in an Indian town will have probably walked past just such a signboard, and their ubiquity gives Narayan the concept for one of his best novels. Like *The Financial Expert*, *The Painter of Signs* (1976) sees Malgudi at a crossroads: the town is moving into the 1970s, has grown larger and more industrial, and there is a bustle of commerce in the air. But in the era of "license raj", no enterprise can really get rolling without first greasing the wheels of bureaucracy—and so while everything in Malgudi is now for sale, nothing is sold as advertised. In such a world a sign-board is 'inevitable', reflects the protagonist Raman, 'a token of respectable and even noble intentions.' Yet what would happen to his livelihood if, somehow, this necessity were to disappear? Perhaps blackmailers, he muses, might pay him to splash the city's petty imbroglios across its blank walls: the issue of leases for market stalls certainly deserves an airing, as does the man who embezzled the babies' milk powder sent by USAID, and of course 'the contract for that piece of roadmending'.<sup>38</sup> Raman's real object, in fact, is to find a way of doing without money and its corrupting influence altogether—although he soon realizes that such an ambition, in such an India, is like 'a desire for a dry spot while drifting along neck deep in a cesspool'. Narayan's long-term readers may well have gulped at the unrelieved bitterness of this line. 1950s India as he understood it had been a paradise of middlemen, in which each actor was in a relationship of clientage to someone higher up the chain (contractor to architect, architect to library trustees, and even trustees to their political patron in Madras). But with the passage of two decades, corruption in Malgudi has attained

---

<sup>34</sup> R.K. Narayan, *The Financial Expert* (London: Vintage, 2001), 192-93.

<sup>35</sup> Fakrul Alam, "Narrative Strategies in Two Narayan Novels," in *R.K. Narayan: Critical Perspectives*, ed. A.L. McLeod (Delhi: Sterling, 1994), 20.

<sup>36</sup> S.R. Ramteke, *R.K. Narayan and His Social Perspective* (Delhi: Atlantic, 2008), 122.

<sup>37</sup> R.K. Narayan, *A Writer's Nightmare: Selected Essays 1958-1988* (London: Penguin, 1988), 66.

<sup>38</sup> R.K. Narayan, *The Painter of Signs* (London: Penguin, 1982), 14.

an altogether more entrepreneurial scope, and there is no call for a wheedling Dr Pal to fish out the town's dirty laundry, for it is brazenly visible to all. Perhaps, Narayan fears, public values have already shifted to the extent that the most outrageous scams now earn for their perpetrators a kind of kudos: the same roguish lustre, as we will see in the next section, that clothes those screen villains whose cupidity is mitigated by the impressive coolness with which they manage and distribute their 'thoda jokhim'—their daily fraction of risk.

Where then is Narayan intentionally, or unconsciously, positioning himself? Certainly he echoes, at times, the snobberies of a service class that inherited its prejudices from its British predecessors. The narrator of 'Annamalai' leaves his neighbourhood because the municipal chairman's relative, a haulier and manure contractor, has taken up residence nearby 'and it dawned on me that the place was not meant for my kind any more'.<sup>39</sup> More poignantly, he voices the anxieties of a clerical constituency whose fixed wages leave them at the mercy of currency fluctuation, while unscrupulous businessmen secure political patronage and outstrip them in the scramble for resources. R.A. Singh has described characters like Raman, or Joseph in *The Guide*, as 'social asset[s]'—because they are honest, and because they perform some service of value in the town.<sup>40</sup> The procurement economy is the inverse of this social contract. The contractor's trade is parasitic, as Dr Pal is a parasite,<sup>41</sup> and its corruption has an epidemic quality that seeps through and demoralizes the wider world of Malgudi. In one of the few stories featuring a contractor in a speaking role, his taint is literally infectious. Krishna, protagonist of *The English Teacher* (1952), and his wife Susila go house-hunting, and with the help of the builder Swamy, 'a dark man, with a moustache, and a red vermilion hand', they appear to have found their dream home.<sup>42</sup> But while Krishna is walking the veranda and admiring the cottage's superficial polish, at its rear his wife becomes trapped in a filthy latrine buzzing with flies. Like Narayan's own wife Rajam, she subsequently contracts typhoid fever and dies. Swamy makes his final, crass appearance to ask Krishna when the sale might be completed, though the schoolmaster's finances have clearly been drained by medical bills. Even before her death, Susila's slow decline has been mirrored by the economic attenuation of the bourgeois couple's fragile dream of happiness.

While Swamy is a rare example of a character stepping out from Malgudi's shadowy criminal backdrop, in the radical work of Mahasweta Devi the contractor is very much a named antagonist, who exploits the poor and denudes the landscape in the name of development. If this partly recalls the 'rapacious spoiler' of Cunningham and Lushington, it is fitting. For her career of activism against the state's appropriation of forest lands, to serve logging or irrigation projects, has made Devi well aware of the continuity in this practice with the system adopted under British rule. In the Garhwal Himalayas in 1850, one Mr Wilson obtained a lease from the local raja to harvest timber for an annual rent of Rs 400. When the government of the Northwestern Provinces took over the lease in 1864, they kept Wilson on as a contractor to fell the trees for them. The tribal population, who customarily held these forest tracts in common, were now told either that the land had been 'reserved' by the Forestry Department, or that one of their village headman—in many cases already a trusted government contractor—had been recognized as the *zamindar* or hereditary landlord.<sup>43</sup>

The state's arrogation of ownership has persisted in independent India, leading in the 1970s to dramatic confrontations between forest-dwellers and contractors, among whose strategies was to import outside labour unlikely to sympathize with the protestors. This period of violent incursion is the setting for many of Devi's stories, including the collaborations with Gayatri Spivak published in

<sup>39</sup> R.K. Narayan, *A Horse and Two Goats and other stories* (London: Bodley Head, 1970), 86.

<sup>40</sup> R.A. Singh, *Critical Essays on R.K. Narayan's Novels* (Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2002), 30.

<sup>41</sup> R. Ramachandra, "R.K. Narayan's Borderline People," in *R.K. Narayan: Critical Perspectives*, 113.

<sup>42</sup> R.K. Narayan, *The English Teacher* (London: Methuen, 1952), 53.

<sup>43</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts over Natural Resources in India* (London: Sage, 1991), 83-87.

1993 as *Imaginary Maps*. Loggers, road-layers and railwaymen, and the builders of dams—those temples of modernity so ruinous to the thousands expelled for their consecration—represent an illegitimate agency ‘licensed’ by the state to do its dirty work. After Kipling and Steel’s era, the wicked contractor had become principally an urban trope: in *Devi*, he returns to the countryside to harvest resources for urban India. Thus when Latia escapes prosecution for one of his collapsed bridges, the exasperated magistrate demands “‘Why are you here in the jungle with such talents? Go to town’”. “‘What an idea!’”, the contractor replies, “‘In the jungle area everything is profit. Tribal and outcaste labour is so cheap’”.<sup>44</sup>

Latia is the antagonist, or rather tormentor, in ‘Douloti the Bountiful’, a story that centres on a brothel that principally serves men at work on a new cement plant. The brothel’s inmates are held in debt bondage, in exactly the same way that their male relatives are trapped by landowners, or by the labour contractors recruiting men for the state-owned coal mine. After purchasing the girls’ debt, Latia offers them as treats to his clients in the civil administration. The ripeness and robustness of these tribal maidens is his special boast—for they too form part of rural India’s rich bounty—while his attitude to their world is mirrored by the Chinese army, whose rumoured invasion serves to date the story to 1962. The contractor becomes, in *Devi*’s writing, a figure of inherited authority, political power (Latia’s fleet of lorries are vital electioneering assets), and embodied violence. Hers is an outlook too bleak and brutal to be palatable in mass-entertainment, where such men are generally portrayed as brakes on national progress, rather than its very spearhead. But it is to the commercial cinema that we must look, finally, for the fullest proliferation of the contractor-as-villain, and for signs of his future as a fictional device.

#### Mixing Cement into Sand: the Contractor as Screen Villain

In spite of *Devi*’s revisionism, the filmic contractor is invariably a city man, usually pursuing a debauched western lifestyle. He belongs to a class of interrelated scoundrels, for as Jyotika Virdi has noted, the parasites of a protectionist economy—hoarders, black-marketeers and above all ‘smugglers’—are a frequent locus of treachery in films from the 1970s onwards, much as they were scapegoated by nationalist politicians of the time.<sup>45</sup> But the contractor (whom, as we have seen, boasts a much longer pedigree), because of his involvement with civil works, has a particularly relevant role to play in a related trope. The corruption of an idealistic young worker embodying the national conscience has been a persistent theme, from the dutiful engineer in Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s *Satyakam* (released in 1969 but set in the years immediately after independence), who resists pressure to fudge some surveying, to Shah Rukh Khan’s lead in *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman* (1992), whose rivals plot to sabotage a bridge under his supervision. The plot of *Jurmana* (1979) calls for a hero who has already been perverted by wealth and luxury, and hence he is cast as a building contractor—though love for a virtuous woman ultimately restores him to the straight and narrow. Alternatively, *Kala Bazaar* (The Black Market, 1989), with its catchy opening number ‘Paisa Bolta Hai’ (Money Talks), brings a light-fingered but naive government clerk into collusion with a truly evil and well-organized trio: the first of whom obtains and traffics in government licenses, and the second of whom uses those licenses to throw up rotten buildings, while the third rubs out any meddlers.

All these themes are merged in the wacky plot of *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*, Kundan Shah’s 1983 satirical comedy whose title is variously translated as *Just Let It Go*, *Chums*, or more idiomatically as *Let*

---

<sup>44</sup> Mahasweta Devi, *Imaginary Maps*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 65.

<sup>45</sup> Jyotika Virdi, *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Films as Social History* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 105.

*Sleeping Dogs Lie*. The film follows two photographers in their attempt to expose the malfeasance of the rival builders Ahuja and Tarneja. Devoid of scruples, this cowboy duo enjoy a local monopoly on public works, while their private developments invariably contravene Bombay zoning regulations—privileges obtained, in both cases, by ministering to the vanity and greed of Commissioner D'Mello. A recent book has revealed that Shah's original screenplay was titled 'Opening Ceremony', and hence the film memorably begins with the two heroes struggling to entice customers into their humble new photographic studio with a tray of free snacks.<sup>46</sup> But the final script also came to feature an 'opening ceremony' at the heart of the story, a bitter plot-twist in which one of the contractors coats an outrageously fraudulent civil project in a spurious moral facade. After settling D'Mello permanently through the expedient of murder, Tarneja dedicates a flyover in his honour and delivers a pompous eulogy at the ribbon-cutting. Praising the deceased's devotion to the public welfare, he expresses his hope that the new roadway will prove a convenience to slum-dwellers as well as to motorists:

... aur kai log, kai garib log ek din is pul ke niche apna ghar basaaenge.

... and some people, some poor folk will one day make their homes beneath this bridge.<sup>47</sup>

It would appear the contractor's optimism was not misplaced, for as we learn subsequently, several people were crushed to death when the D'Mello Bridge promptly collapsed several nights after its inauguration. And well it deserves that name—for the missing commissioner, like those sacrificed by the Rajputs when building their forts, is interred in its foundations.

The film rejoices in cynical humour: most contractors are content to mix a little sand into their cement, one character sanguinely remarks, but this chap mixes his cement into sand! Thus corruption is to be expected (and perhaps inwardly applauded) below a certain tolerable limit. The film's most elaborate joke, however, comes when Tarneja concludes his speech at the flyover, and a new Commissioner—the craven Srivastav—takes his turn at eulogizing the murdered D'Mello:

*Ek hi morche par itna mahaan kaam kiya aur jiske liye voh amar ho gaye. Aur voh morcha hai: gatar. D'Mello sahab aksar kaha karte the kisi desh ki unnati ki pahchaan agar kisi cheez se hoti hai to voh hai gatar. Voh gatar ke lie jiye aur gatar ke liye mar gaye. Marte marte unke aakhiri shabd the: gatar!*

He took one issue as his life's work, and for this he has achieved immortality. And that issue was: the gutter. D'Mello Sahib often used to remark that if there was one measure of a nation's progress, then that was its gutters. For gutters he lived, and for gutters he died. As he lay dying, his last word was: gutter!

As a mark of respect to their loyal servant, he concludes, all gutters in the city of Bombay will for one day be shut. Srivastav's performance reprises the traditional PWD man—as exemplified in *The Potter's Thumb*—in all his pomp and self-mortifying pedantry. Lingering colonial postures are thus exposed to ridicule, but the film also implies that those who strike them in contemporary India, or who rather invoke accompanying values of public service, duty and discipline, are either hypocrites or, like the Prime Minister herself, authoritarians. At the point in Manoj Kumar's aforementioned morality tale *Roti Kapda aur Makan*, when the misguided Bharat's conscience begins to reassert itself, the camera pans across a portrait of Indira Gandhi. Yet when the identical shot is deployed in *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*, it is an omen that the crusading editor Shobha is about to emerge as a despicable sellout.

<sup>46</sup> Jai Arjun Singh, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro: Seriously Funny Since 1983* (Noida: HarperCollins India, 2010), 48.

<sup>47</sup> Quotations from films have been transcribed and translated by me.

This is not the only instance in which *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* twists tropes and betrays audience expectations. The film's grimacing pessimism culminates in a hectic chase that sends the entire cast stumbling through the stage-door of a theatre, where they get mixed up with a production of the Mahabharata. At first, the packed house would appear to betoken the quasi-theatrical settings—courtroom, stadium, or latterly TV studio (as in Aamir Khan's *PK*, 2014)—with which so many Indian melodramas conventionally conclude, identities being unmasked and justice dispensed while a representative national audience looks on. Instead, the villains draw the police inspector aside, a deal—literally backstairs—is struck, and the heroes find themselves in prison. The film's viewers depart with a sense of bafflement and self-reproach: how could we have expected that such exemplary crooks would ever get their comeuppance? Drawing attention to these courtroom denouements in a recent study, Ravi Vasudevan (2011, 150, 310, 312) remarks that *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* marks a cynical turn in the public outlook, whereby 'the city as comic, absurdist frame' displaces narratives that culminate in the delivery of justice. Bombay itself is central to this cynical and anxious tendency, and the question of 'dwelling' or 'habitation' within a city where the state 'is no longer an impartial arbiter' brings the men responsible for constructing its urban jungle to the fore.<sup>48</sup>

In this, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* speaks directly to contemporary Bombay realities, at a time when public confidence in civil projects was at a low ebb—in fact, the scandals of the day are incorporated into the very celluloid fabric of the movie. While Shah was working erratically on his script in 1982, the Bombay newspapers were full of a flyover—one of the city's earliest—which had collapsed outside Gloria Church in Byculla. Shah sent a friend to shoot stock footage of the rubble, and this incident gave pith and bite to the concept that became *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*.<sup>49</sup> It is this footage, the earliest to be shot for the film, that plays when the demise of D'Mello Bridge is announced, and it may well have supplied the inspiration for that burlesque 'opening ceremony' which emerged as its central scene. Also registered in the film's striking visual language, furthermore, are the shifts in labour relations that served to so empower the men driving Bombay's late-twentieth-century urbanism. *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* appeared amidst the death-throes of the textile industry (just as *Roti Kapda aur Makan* was released in 1974, a year of fierce industrial dispute on Indian Railways)—two defeated strikes that, as Vasudevan proposes, marked the drastic enfeeblement of organized labour.<sup>50</sup> Robbed of union protection, the city's labour pool was thus exposed on a grand scale to the contractors' perennial strategy of enfranchising risk, even as these same contractors were benefiting from redevelopment of former industrial zones. Tarneja gives D'Mello his first bribe as the two men ride a crane that rotates them high over a skyline of unfinished high-rises: the first landmarks of the new, services-oriented economy then assuming its footprint atop the textile mills of Joseph Stephens's time. Beyond, though not visible, lie the slums housing the former mill-hands, into which the film's educated but precarious heroes are forever in danger of slipping.

From the most niche of readerships—the British community in colonial India—to the modern mass culture of the cinema, the contractor has evoked ambiguous responses. He is the agent of material progress, and yet also its inhibitor. He has been figured both as an anti-national saboteur of the state, and as the state's smirking accomplice, whose chicanery reveals the decline or outright illegitimacy of its power. While as a trope he has evolved, therefore, in accordance with changing pre- and post-independence contexts, he has done so within a consistent framework, and I would expect his attributes to persist under new guises. Viewing more recent cinema, it may be tempting to speculate

---

<sup>48</sup> Ravi Vasudevan, *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 150, 310, 312.

<sup>49</sup> Singh, *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*, 48.

<sup>50</sup> Vasudevan, *Melodramatic Public*, 304.

that the parasites of the “license raj” are finally ceding way to the freaks of post-liberalization India. *Khosla ka Ghosla* (2006) and *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* (2006), for example, feature comedy villains of the same ilk. But now they are developers or landsharks profiting from rocketing property prices, and their victim is not an idealistic young man, but—as in Narayan’s fiction—the clerical middle-classes unable to keep pace with new economic conditions. Obsolescence and supercession similarly overtakes the retired teacher Masterji in Aravind Adiga’s novel *Last Man in Tower* (2011), whose old-fashioned respectability makes him initially an asset to his housing block, until his unbending attitude to a developer renders him instead a liability. However, given the contractor’s longevity thus far, it would be premature to anticipate his imminent disappearance. In fictional representations, the trope that has advanced from smalltime *thekedar* to ‘trusted government contractor’ to property tycoon may only once again be in the process of reconfiguring itself for a higher-stakes context. In the day-to-day economy, it is likely that neoliberal policies will only further proliferate the deferral of risk through multiple layers in the chain of production—a process that is afoot and abroad in Europe and North America, as well as in India. And in the world of infrastructure, old satire has not lost its savour: in 2016 a flyover gave way in Kolkata under circumstances ludicrously and horribly mirroring the farcical antics of *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro*: including the death of street-dwellers who had taken shelter under the structure, and even an attempt by a PR agent representing the responsible parties to blame the collapse on terrorist sabotage. Contractors may be expected to undermine the promise of a rupture with the socialist past touted by the architects of India’s economic liberalization, who have yet to implement robust scrutiny in public procurement, have made only the clumsiest efforts to curtail the black-money zone in which corrupt middleman operate, and lack the foresight to fashion a system which can exploit the social utility (visible, arguably, in Premchand) of skilled and efficient contractors. Most of all, they can certainly do very little to efface the cultural impress left by a roguish legacy, spanning well over one hundred years, and touching so nearly and bitterly on the everyday struggle for a livelihood.